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SUBJECT: SUCCESSFUL SOUTHCOM VISIT TO PARAGUAY

Classified By: DCM Michael J. Fitzpatrick; Reasons 1.4 (B&D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: SOUTHCOM Military Deputy Commander Lt. Gen. Spears conducted a successful visit to Paraguay March 24-26. Defense Minister Barreiro Spaini voiced his support to pursuing a general agreement on military cooperation (while cautioning that he is but one of many voices in the government). Barreiro heartily welcomed U.S. assistance for development of a national security/defense strategy as a baseline and roadmap for defense reform and asked for greater educational support for military professionalization across the services. He stated his support for continued U.S. training and development of the military's two top units: the CECOPAZ peace-keeping engineering unit and the DCEI joint rapid reaction force. Spears also received similarly positive messages of appreciation for USG support in separate meetings with the Chief of Defense (CHOD) and the various Service Chiefs. In a sidebar, the CHOD suggested to the Ambassador any "ambiguities" in bilateral defense relations are political in nature -- and will soon be removed. Spears concluded his visit with a high-profile dedication of a U.S. plaque at Paraguay's Pantheon of Heroes. END SUMMARY.

Minister of Defense Bareiro  
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¶2. (C) Ambassador accompanied SOUTHCOM Military Deputy Commander Lt. Gen. Spears to March 25 call on Defense Minister (and retired General) Barreiro Spaini. (ODC Chief and DCM also attended.) An ebullient Barreiro warmly welcomed Spears and immediately urged greater professionalization ties with the U.S. military. He confirmed readiness to receive (in late April) an international team from DoD's Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies (CHDS) to assist Paraguay's own efforts to develop national defense and national security strategies.

¶3. (C) But the Minister insisted he wanted to go further, and fast. He asked for (unclassified) exchanges on a wide range of professional and technical issues, starting with counter-terrorism, plus local, regional and global security issues and others which affect their defense interests. He asked for greater access to CHDS, Army War College, NDU and other sources of professional development publications. Spears promised him within the next two weeks hard-copies all the latest U.S. military journals, plus online access to appropriate U.S. training schools. Barreiro underscored his appreciation of two "U.S. military characteristics" which he came to appreciate during his four years (of in-service training) at U.S. military facilities: Honesty, and Sincerity. The U.S. military's ability to learn from past mistakes, he stressed, was a trait well-worth emulating.

¶4. (C) Bareiro also highlighted the role of U.S. training in preparing the units Paraguay deployed in response to the New Year's Eve attack on the military outpost at Tacuati, San Pedro. He termed the now-concluded 7-week deployment a success, having done great economic damage to local narco-trafficking interests without a single shot being fired -- despite, what he called "police interference." (Highlighting the negative role the National Police play in the region, he stated the police force is "totally penetrated" by narcotics traffickers; not that the Army is made up of angels, he added, but the police force is more dispersed, has more interaction with the population and is

"more permeable". )

15. (C) Minister Bareiro reaffirmed efforts to move forward with readying Paraguay's Peacekeeping Unit (CECOPAZ) engineering company for its first UN deployment this year -- thanks to sustained USG contributions. He indicated his support for continued U.S. training of the joint services Rapid Reaction Force (DCEI). He was appreciative of the planned DoD humanitarian assistance programs this year, including the forthcoming Army Corps of Engineers construction of three regional crisis operations centers for the Paraguayan government. He assented to April-May visits to begin planning for the surge in humanitarian programs under New Horizons in 2010.

16. (C) The Ambassador and Spears both suggested that some sort of framework agreement for military cooperation would enhance cooperation across the board, so that there was clarity and so that each and every activity did not need to "reinvent the wheel". Bareiro stated his agreement, brushing aside queries about how the recent UNASUR Defense Council meeting might affect Paraguay's interest in pursuing such arrangements with the U.S. (as he had suggested previously, reftels). Bareiro then asked whether we thought it better that such an agreement be short, broad and general or longer, detailed and specific. Before an answer could be provided, Bareiro (correctly) answered his own question: A broad bilateral agreement was preferable at the political level, with the two militaries left to then work out the details of each activity. As the Embassy well knows, he smiled, Paraguayan politicians never miss the opportunity to politicize anything; so why create unnecessary problems? He added he would see President Lugo the same afternoon in order to inform him and seek any further guidance.

17. (C) Bareiro noted President Lugo recently reactivated the long-dormant National Defense Council. Led by the president, composed of the Ministers of Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs, and supplemented by advisors from the military's institute for strategic studies (IAEE), the NDC is designed to consider options for, and then focus implementation of, national security strategies. He suggested a draft strategy document had already been created, but not yet presented to the National Defense Council. Among the issues currently under discussion in the NDC, he noted: Reorganization of the military; Creation of a national intelligence capability by the military; Military relations with/outreach to civilian communities. He added the Council should also help de-conflict roles and responsibilities; where, for example, is dividing line between the Paraguayan military and police in counter-terrorism?

18. (C) Spears underscored the need for the Minister and President's personal involvement in developing a National Security Strategy that responds to Paraguay's needs; CHDS would only facilitate Paraguay's production of a Paraguayan product -- one which needed the Minister's leadership and commitment were it to come to pass. Bareiro readily agreed. The Minister also stressed his personal involvement in activities not traditionally seen as the role of the Paraguayan MOD (who, by law, is still not in the formal chain of command). Some previous Ministers, he said, only administered "the building", nothing more. But he is intent on reordering and modernizing the forces, which rubs some Generals raw. He added that he first had made a point bringing in a civilian as his Vice Minister. But when that individual proved "not operational enough," he brought his current Vice Minister (and ex Air Force Chief) back from retirement.

19. (C) In closing, Bareiro emphasized Paraguay's many political debts to the United States. When Brazilian troops closed in on Mariscal Lopez and his family after laying waste to the entire population of Piribebuy during the 1870s War of the Triple Alliance, it was U.S. Ambassador MacMahon (traveling with Lopez) who prevented the slaughter of Paraguay's First Family. Surrounded and under fire, MacMahon flew the U.S. flag from the house they were sheltered in, and

the Brazilians withdrew. We cannot forget what we owe the U.S., Bareiro underscored -- especially since that house happened to have been owned by Bareiro's maternal grandmother.

#### CHOD BENITEZ

¶10. (C) In a follow-on meeting with the Chief of Defense, Spears underscored to Rear Admiral Benitez U.S. desire to strengthen mil-mil relations, and the opportunities for each to learn from the other. Benitez stated that "on the military level, we are emphatic" that Paraguay desires to increase/deepen military ties with the United States. The military is very appreciative of U.S. cooperation. On the political level, he added, things are good "and will be better." He shared Spears' vision of a relationship built on mutual respect, common understanding of shared opportunities, challenges and goals.

¶11. (C) Benitez noted that Paraguay is undergoing "a very special time" now (a clear reference to the first non-Colorado government in decades). Democracy, he stressed, needs strong institutions, faithful to its own ideals. U.S. assistance in institutional development and combating ant-democratic values, he suggested, would be the most beneficial type of aid possible. Benitez also committed to Paraguay's "doing our part" to ensure a CECOPAZ company will be ready for UN deployment (under Paraguay's own flag) by approximately July, with a second company on stand-by. He stressed the military is shifting funds and resources in order to meet that commitment, one he is happy to meet, and for which he is grateful for SOUTHCOM's continued support in keeping Paraguay on track. Spears concluded by adding that even as the SOUTHCOM Commander is soon to rotate out, SOUTHCOM's commitment to the region, and to Paraguay in particular, remain strong and will continue unabated.

#### AMBASSADORIAL SIDE-BAR WITH THE CHOD

¶12. (C) After Spears departed for next event, Ambassador (and DCM) stayed behind to discuss matters further with Admiral Benitez. Asked about rumors regarding possible renewed shake-ups in the military, Benitez assured the Ambassador that there is clear "vertical cohesion" from the President to the Minister to himself to the military services. He assured there was clear support for a military cooperation agreement or SOFA with the USG. Any of the "ambiguity" or "noise" that the Embassy was picking up, he said, comes from outside that chain. Any such "amber lights" on expanded mil-mil cooperation came from other political sectors, including from within the Foreign Ministry. He cautioned us, even then, not to interpret everything as intentional signals to us. The Foreign Ministry, he noted, is well-known for bureaucratic lethargy.

¶13. (C) Benitez made clear his comfort with the general direction of relations, saying at several points, any slowness now is "momentary, not even temporary." He stated that unspecified impediments (in bilateral relations) would soon be removed and that he would inform the Ambassador when the yellow lights had turned green. (COMMENT: We can only surmise that Benitez was referring to possible forthcoming personnel changes at the MFA; Vice FM Lara Castro, an opponent of closer U.S. ties, is now taking major flak from all directions for his political and administrative shortcomings. Rumors abound that he may soon receive an Ambassadorship abroad. END COMMENT.) Asked about rumors of political pressures on the military or concerns that retired General Oviedo was plotting anew, Benitez said knowingly that "Oviedo has been plotting since the day he was born," and opined that any such pressures were currently entirely manageable.

¶14. (C) After separate calls on the various service chiefs, Lt. Gen. Spears publicly paid homage to Paraguay's fallen in battle with the unveiling of a plaque at Paraguay's Pantheon of Heroes. Mrs. Spears separately provided \$7,000 worth of humanitarian assistance to a local half-way house. They concluded the visit with a dinner discussion with various

Paraguayan alumni of CHDS programs.

COMMENT

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¶15. (C) COMMENT: Lt. Gen. Spears' visit was a success, both in military and diplomatic terms. He assured Paraguayan military and civilian defense officials alike of continued U.S. cooperation (which took on added significance in the wake of the announcement of ADM Stavridis' forthcoming rotation out from SOUTHCOM). Spears explored with counterparts concrete areas in which to continue such support. He made clear publicly and privately that U.S. assistance flows out of a relationship based on mutual respect and sovereign decisions. And his timely visit helped advance efforts to obtain an agreement covering status of forces and other administrative issues which would facilitate the continued cooperation clearly sought by both nations. END COMMENT.

¶16. (U) Lt. Gen. Spears and party departed post without an opportunity to clear on this message.

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